

Facilitation and Grant Management Project Evaluation

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Summary

The Facilitation and Grant Management project involves two separate aspects: the administration and organisation of RIC meetings, and development of associated projects and protocols; and the administration of grants. Grant management took place under the old consortium process; projects were asked to submit bids which were then rated and the top four awarded funding. Funded projects received monitoring visits and completed performance monitoring returns.

To conduct this evaluation, email questionnaires were sent to three stakeholder groups: RIC members, Regional Infrastructure Development Group (RIDG) members and Infrastructure Strategic Partnership (ISP) members. 14 RIC members and 8 others returned completed questionnaires. The researchers also interviewed the Senior Policy and Development Manager at VONNE, who oversees the project, and undertook a desk-based review of reports and papers relating to the project.

The Facilitation project has successfully supported the RIC in its first year in its new structure, helping it to, for instance, achieve Fit for Purpose status, produce a Delivery Plan, Business Plan and Strategy, carry out a self-assessment, and commission research projects. The Grant Management project has managed to create the appropriate procedures for grant management, and make grants to FINE and the ICT project (the Facilitation and Grant Making project also receives funding).

Survey findings revealed that RIC members and stakeholders regard the facilitation of the RIC to be successful. For instance, the majority of respondents thought that RIC meetings were well run, that VONNE project staff facilitating RIC meetings are helpful and supportive, that the materials provided to RIC members are of a high quality, and that meeting minutes are accurate. For the grant management aspect of the project, most RIC members and stakeholders agreed that the prioritisation and rating procedures used to assess grant applications were useful and valid, and that grants were awarded based on a fair process of appraisal.

Concerns were raised about the short timescales previously involved in the grant management process, and about the need to ensure that any funding opportunities are advertised right across the third sector.

At a Change Check review session, RIC members and stakeholders were asked to use the survey findings to assess the impact of the different aspects of the RIC with reference to the resources devoted to each. The results of this process were also largely positive, although future funding and grant management issues are in question for the RIC.

It was not considered appropriate to make recommendations for the project. The Facilitation project operates in a way that responds to the developing needs of the RIC, and the research findings did not reveal any particular problems with the way that it has worked up to now. The Grant Management aspect of the project has been completed in its current form. However, there were some potential transferable lessons emerging from the findings for future grant management programmes, e.g. minimising time pressures in the bidding programme, and making sure all the third sector is made aware of funding opportunities.

1. Background

This project consists of two separate aspects – facilitating the RIC and making grants – and for the purposes of presenting the evaluation findings, these will be addressed separately. However, a single questionnaire survey was carried out for this project, containing sections about the RIC, the RIC Facilitation work, and Grant Management.

Facilitation

The Facilitation project involves the administration and organisation of RIC meetings, and development of associated projects and protocols. The project takes up around 30 hours of VONNE staff time per month. This evaluation focuses on RIC facilitation during the last year, since the re-organisation of RIC.

Outcomes

The project has the following outcomes:

- Review Consortium membership;
- Service bi-monthly meetings (organise and take minutes);
- Facilitate discussion;
- Produce papers;
- Revise Development plan;
- Liaise with Capacitybuilders;
- Communicate with wider VCS.

Activities:

The project has involved the following activities:

- Organising meetings (researching and booking venues and catering, and inviting members to attend);
- Producing and circulating meeting minutes, agendas, briefing papers and presentations;
- Organising guest speakers and presentations;
- Recording members' attendance at meetings;
- Liaising with Capacitybuilders and other funders, e.g. inviting Capacitybuilders Regional Coordinators to attend Consortium meetings to share information;
- Helping the RIC to meet its targets, e.g. creating a delivery plan, reviewing development plan and RIC membership, ensuring Capacitybuilders deadlines are met;
- Chairing initial meetings until a RIC Chair could be appointed;
- Commissioning and carrying out research and consultation to assist the formation and development of the RIC;
- Informing VONNE members about new RIC structure and other developments;

Grant Management

Grant Management took place under the old consortium process. It involved invitations to register an expression of interest, from which RIC developed a priority list, which was ranked, and the top four projects were funded. Each grant funded project has to meet regular reporting and monitoring requirements, and receives support visits from VONNE staff to ensure targets are being met, identify any problems and develop solutions. The project takes up around 30 hours of VONNE staff time per month. This evaluation focuses on the Grant Management project since 2006.

Outcomes

The project has the following outcomes:

- Administration of grants;
- Quarterly monitoring forms distribute, return and check;
- Issue quarterly payments to projects;
- Monitoring visits and on going telephone support to projects;
- Performance reports to the RIC.

Activities

The project has involved the following activities:

- Producing and distributing monitoring forms to projects receiving funding;
- Ensuring that projects complete and return monitoring forms and project planning information;
- Undertaking monitoring visits;
- Administering grants to projects;
- Offering support to projects as needed.

2. Evaluation methods

The following research methods were used for this evaluation:

1) Desk-based research

Reports and papers relating to the Facilitation and Grant Management Project were reviewed to gain an understanding of the RIC and provide background information for the evaluation. Materials studied included monitoring information, RIC meeting minutes and supporting papers, and RIC protocols.

2) Interviews and meetings

A semi-structured interview took place with Jane Cater, the Senior Policy and Development Manager at VONNE. VONNE is responsible for facilitating the development of the RIC and administering Capacitybuilders' funding in the region.

Members of the research team attended RIC and RIDG meetings over the course of the research programme to give progress reports and consult with members.

3) Questionnaire survey

Questionnaires were designed and sent out by email to RIC stakeholders. For the purposes of the evaluation, project stakeholders were divided into three separate groups – RIC Members, RIDG (Regional Infrastructure Development Group) Members and ISP (Infrastructure Strategic Partnership) Members. Separate questionnaires were developed to target each of these groups, although they were each based on the same overall design. The survey findings reflect the views of these different groups.

To maximise response rates, the survey was emailed to RIC stakeholders twice. Copies of questionnaires were also taken to the RIC meeting in May 2008 for members to complete by hand.

4) Change Check

Change Check is an approach to assessing the impact of community organisations which is endorsed by bassac and the Community Alliance. 3 groups of stakeholders were identified and sent questionnaires about the activities of the project, after carrying out an interview with the project lead to break down the resources used by the different parts of the project (i.e. standard working hours in a month), which were represented in graph form for the review session. Key stakeholders were invited to this session and the collated findings presented to them. They were then asked to rank the impact of each part of the project against the time committed to each, based on the information presented to them. Working from this visual record the participants in the session examined the various aspects of the work undertaken by the project and from this developed a number of action points/recommendations for the future.

3. Evaluation findings

Facilitation

Achievements

Facilitation of the new consortium has been successful to date. By May 2008 the Facilitation project had supported the RIC in achieving the following:

- Successfully met criteria and been identified as Fit for Purpose;
- Submitted three projects to the Modernising Programme;
- Completed its review, established a new consortium, and put appropriate protocols in place;
- Collectively created and completed a Delivery Plan;
- Carried out self-assessment;
- Commissioned research for a Communications Strategy, Evaluations and Training Needs Analysis;
- Held meetings on at least a bi-monthly basis (on 15 May 2007, 6 June 2007, 12 July 2007, 27 September 2007, 18 October 2007, 17 January 2008, 12 February 2008, 13 March 2008, 15th May 2008);
- Held planning days for Delivery Plan, Strategy and Business Plan production;
- Formed sub-groups when necessary;
- Researched needs and produced a 7 year Strategy and 3 year Business Plan for regional infrastructure.

Challenges

Facilitation project monitoring information and the RIC self-assessment evaluation identified two main risks to the project meeting its targets. The first was the challenge of meeting timescales set by Capacitybuilders, e.g. to form a new group, create a Delivery Plan, and perform other specified tasks. Time pressures also meant there was no opportunity to hold inductions for new members until after the Delivery Planning process was completed, although members were briefed. The self-assessment evaluation highlighted the concern that such time pressures could impede the natural flow of group development for the RIC.

Secondly, time demands are great for those involved with the RIC, including the high demand on the Infrastructure Officer's time to produce protocols and assist with the formation of new group, and the demand on members' time to attend meetings, planning days and assessment. However, VONNE has been able to offer increased time and capacity to the project through the creation of a new post and backfilling of existing staff, which has helped to address this issue (although there was an initial increase in existing staff's workload, especially during the recruitment stage).

Grant Management

Achievements

This project began in July 2006. VONNE had not previously been involved in grant management. Staff successfully managed to create grant management procedures, with the support of the Community Foundation serving Tyne & Wear and Northumberland. The Community Foundation was previously responsible for the administration of Capacitybuilders funding in the region.

Grants have been made to FINE and the ICT project; the Facilitation and Grant Making project also receives funding.

Challenges

There have been some challenges to the project. Late receipt of the regional grant has on more than one occasion led to delays in the projects receiving their funding, which has resulted in shorter delivery times for project outcomes.

Project monitoring information identified problems in receiving information on time as a risk for the project.

VONNE has re-structured during the past year, and demands on staff have increased. New staff in post, the introduction of new internal systems for admin and finance, and the recruitment of temporary staff for maternity cover were identified as risks to the project achieving its targets. However, thorough staff inductions were planned to offset any associated risks.

Survey response rates

A total of 22 respondents provided information about the RIC. Questionnaires were sent to 62 RIC Members. 14 completed and returned questionnaires, while a further 4 replied but declined to comment. This represents a response rate of 23%. Questionnaires were sent to 38 RIC Stakeholders (25 ISP members and 13 RIDG members). 8 completed and returned questionnaires, while another 2 replied but declined to comment. Of those who returned questionnaires, 5 were ISP members, 1 was a RIDG member, and 2 were members of both the ISP and the RIDG. This represents response rates of 28% for the ISP and 23% for the RIDG.

Response rates were fairly low despite the fact that stakeholders were given at least two chances to contribute to the process. There are several possible reasons for this:

- People may have felt that they did not have sufficient understanding or knowledge of the project to contribute;
- The project may not be especially relevant or interesting to some of its members or stakeholders;
- People may have been too busy to complete the survey, given the short timescale;
- People may not have had particularly strong opinions, so did not feel the need to comment on it.

Headline survey findings – Facilitation

- The majority of RIC Members agreed or strongly agreed with the following statements (number of responses is shown in brackets):
 - RIC meetings are usually well run (12)
 - VONNE project staff facilitating RIC meetings are helpful and supportive (12)
 - The materials provided to RIC members (e.g. on the memory stick) are of a high quality (10)
 - RIC meeting minutes are accurate (10) and have an appropriate level of detail (8)
 - RIC meetings usually take place at venues that suit me (8)
 - The Business Plan development process for RIC has been successfully managed (8)
 - The protocols developed for RIC (e.g. terms of reference, roles and responsibilities) are of a high quality (8)
- 5 RIC Stakeholders agreed that VONNE project staff facilitating RIC meetings are helpful and supportive, and 4 agreed with each of the following: RIC meetings are usually well run; RIC meeting minutes are accurate; RIC meeting minutes have an appropriate level of detail; and the facilitation of RIC enables effective links with other consortia and public sector partners.

Headline survey findings – Grant Management

- 4 RIC Members agreed that the prioritisation and rating procedures used to assess grant applications are useful and valid, and 5 agreed that grants are awarded by RIC based on a fair process of appraisal
- 3 RIC stakeholders agreed that grants are awarded by RIC based on a fair process of appraisal, and a further 3 agreed that the RIC allocates its funding in a way that results in maximum impact for the region

Comments – Facilitation

RIC members' comments about the facilitation of the RIC were generally positive; some examples are included below:

'Very good facilitation by VONNE'

'Very supportive of the work Jane has done for what seems an impossible project'

'Without the facilitation it would have been very difficult to keep such a large disparate group of people engaged in a difficult process'

'The RIC coordination and meeting facilitation has always been of the highest standard and commendably professional for example when dealing with 'digressing' RIC members'

Two people mentioned the choice of venues for RIC meetings. Both thought that it would be better to settle on a single neutral venue for meetings, rather than changing location from meeting to meeting. The reasons given for this were: the same people seem to attend all the meetings regardless of venue; people could not always find unfamiliar venues; and going through the facilities/housekeeping procedures wasted time.

Two people picked up on issues related to behaviour at RIC meetings. One said that meetings sometimes got bogged down by debates around minor issues, and the other said that members sometimes disregarded RIC protocols.

RIDG and ISP members were also asked for their comments about the facilitation of the RIC. These were generally supportive of the project.

Comments – Grant Management

RIC members were asked for their comments on the Grant Management project. Three people commented on the time pressures on the process, which appear to have been imposed by Capacitybuilders, and were thought to have limited the opportunity to develop appropriate projects based on need. One commented that time pressures turned the decision making process into ‘*a bit of a bunfight*’. Only one person commented on the fairness of the decision making process, saying that it was ‘*as fair as possible*’. One person commented that funding opportunities should be advertised widely so that it was not just those around the table at RIC meetings getting a chance to bid.

One RIC member whose organisation had received funding had the following to say:

‘As a previous grantee from RIC funding I can say that the funding allowed my organisation to have a good impact within the region’

One member commented on the reduction in funding:

‘Slashing the funding allocation by Capacitybuilders was a bad, bad move’

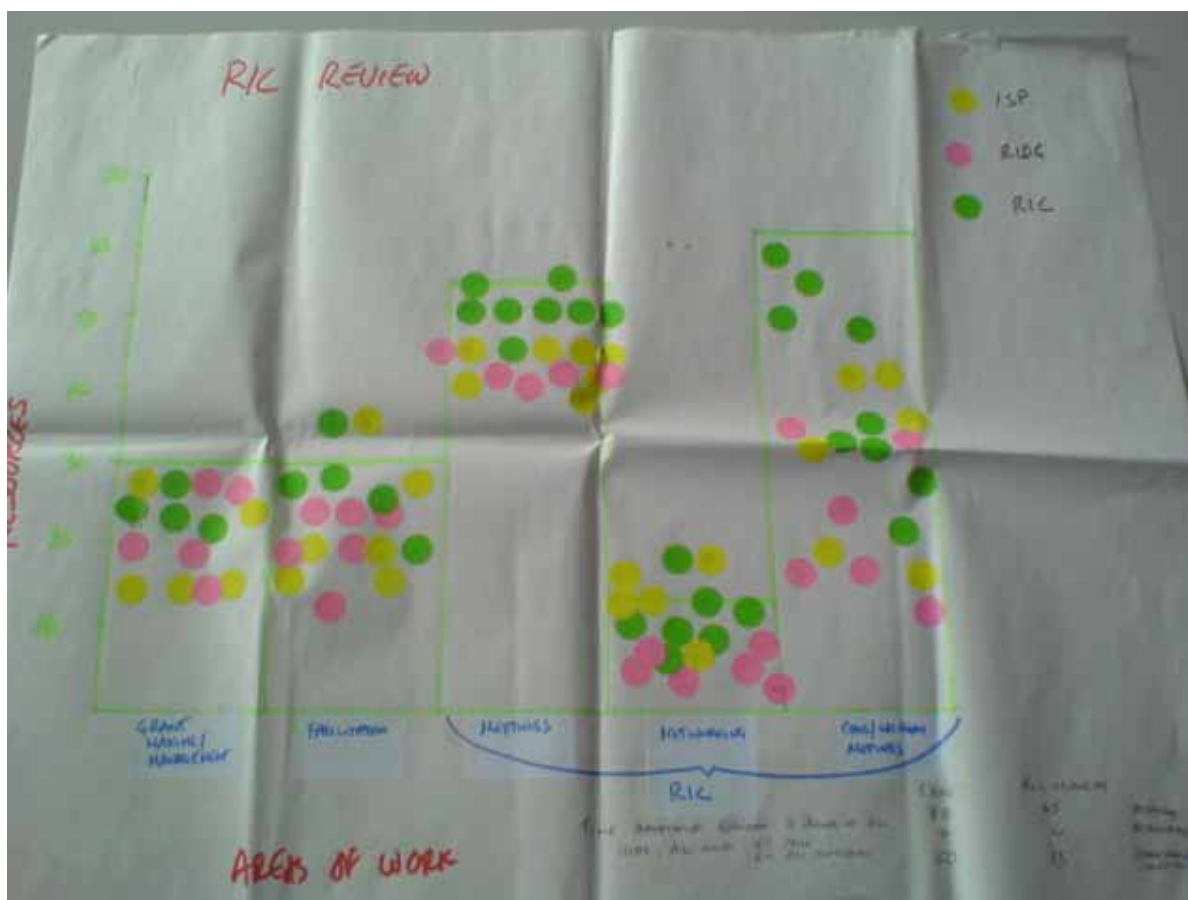
RIDG and ISP members were also asked to comment on the RIC’s Grant Management. Several people said that they did not really know anything about the process (one said they would like to know more). Comments were also made about timescales (‘*silly*’) and what was described as a ‘*sense of cronyism*’. One person thought there was a conflict of interest, as some of the people making funding decisions also wanted funding themselves. There was also a suggestion that ‘*the rating procedures need some work*’.

4. Change Check review process

Impact assessment

A review session was held for RIC members. It was attended by Jane Cater from Vonne, the RIC Chair, three other RIC members, and Stuart Thompson, the consultant working on the RIC Communications Strategy. Two members of the research team were also at the meeting. The survey findings were presented to them, and they were asked to use these to assess the impact of the RIC with regard to meetings, networking, and consultation/work arising from meetings. They were asked to mark this on a graph using colour-coded stickers, in order to create a visual summary of the findings.

The graph and the stickers measuring the impact of each area are shown below. The first two columns show responses to the Facilitation and Grant Management project.



The Facilitation and Grant Management project was reviewed as part of the RIC Impact assessment review meeting. The research findings were generally positive for both aspects of the project, and there was little further discussion about either aspect.

5. Conclusion, action planning and recommendations

It is not considered appropriate to make recommendations or design and action plan for the Facilitation and Grant Management project for several reasons.

Firstly, the nature of the Facilitation project means that it has to operate in a way that responds to the developing needs of the RIC. Secondly, the research findings were generally positive and did not reveal any particular problems with the way that the Facilitation project has worked up to now.

The Grant Management aspect of the project has been completed in its current form, so it is not considered necessary to make any recommendations for its future. However, there were some potential lessons emerging from the findings which could be transferable to any future grant management programmes the RIC is involved with. Respondents identified issues related to time pressures within the bidding programme, the need to make sure everyone in the third sector is made aware of funding opportunities, and the potential conflict of interests brought about by RIC members assessing bids when they were chasing the same funding. Comments were also made about the perceived fairness of the rating and decision making process, but the findings generally supported the notion that the process was fair.

Appendices

Survey results in detail - Facilitation

RIC Members

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
RIC meetings are usually well run	3 (23%)	9 (69%)		1 (8%)	
RIC meetings usually take place at dates and times that suit me	1 (8%)	6 (46%)	6 (46%)		
RIC meetings usually take place at venues that suit me	2 (17%)	6 (50%)	4 (33%)		
The catering at RIC meetings is usually of a high quality	3 (24%)	6 (46%)	2 (15%)	2 (15%)	
RIC meeting minutes are accurate	3 (21%)	7 (50%)	4 (29%)		
RIC meeting minutes have an appropriate level of detail	2 (15%)	6 (46%)	4 (31%)		1 (8%)
The materials provided to RIC members (e.g. on the memory stick) are of a high quality	2 (15%)	8 (62%)	3 (23%)		
The RIC Planning Day 1 at Millfield House was a useful exercise	2 (20%)	6 (60%)	2 (20%)		
The RIC Planning Day 2 at the Glebe Centre was a useful exercise	3 (30%)	6 (60%)	1 (10%)		
The Planning Day for the RIC Delivery Plan (at Blackfriars, June 2007) was a useful exercise		4 (40%)	5 (50%)	1 (10%)	
The Business Plan development process for RIC has been successfully managed	3 (24%)	5 (38%)	5 (38%)		
The protocols developed for RIC (e.g. terms of reference, roles and responsibilities) are of a high quality	3 (24%)	5 (38%)	5 (38%)		
RIC protocols are appropriate for use as templates by VCS organisations who are developing their own protocols	1 (9%)	6 (55%)	3 (27%)	1 (%)	
VONNE project staff facilitating RIC meetings are helpful and supportive	6 (46%)	6 (46%)	1 (8%)		
The facilitation of RIC enables effective links with other consortia and public sector partners	4 (29%)	3 (21%)	5 (36%)	1 (14%)	

ISP Members

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
RIC meetings are usually well run	1 (25%)	3 (75%)			
RIC meeting minutes are accurate		3 (75%)	1 (25%)		
RIC meeting minutes have an appropriate level of detail		3 (75%)	1 (25%)		
The materials provided to RIC members (e.g. on the memory stick) are of a high quality		2 (50%)	2 (50%)		
The Business Plan development process for RIC has been successfully managed		2 (50%)	2 (50%)		
The protocols developed for RIC (e.g. terms of reference, roles and responsibilities) are of a high quality		1 (20%)	4 (80%)		
RIC protocols are appropriate for use as templates by VCS organisations who are developing their own protocols		2 (50%)	1 (25%)	1 (25%)	
VONNE project staff facilitating RIC meetings are helpful and supportive	1 (20%)	4 (80%)			
The facilitation of RIC enables effective links with other consortia and public sector partners		3 (60%)		2 (40%)	

RIDG Members (note: 2 of these are also ISP members)

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
RIC meetings are usually well run		1			
RIC meeting minutes are accurate		1 (50%)	1 (50%)		
RIC meeting minutes have an appropriate level of detail		1 (50%)	1 (50%)		
The materials provided to RIC members (e.g. on the memory stick) are of a high quality		1 (50%)	1 (50%)		
The Business Plan development process for RIC has been successfully managed		1 (50%)	1 (50%)		
The protocols developed for RIC (e.g. terms of reference, roles and responsibilities) are of a high quality		1 (50%)	1 (50%)		
RIC protocols are appropriate for use as templates by VCS organisations who are developing their own protocols		1 (50%)	1 (50%)		
VONNE project staff facilitating RIC meetings are helpful and supportive		1 (50%)	1 (50%)		
The facilitation of RIC enables effective links with other consortia and public sector partners		1 (50%)		1 (50%)	

Survey results in detail – Grant Management

RIC Members

Statement	Response (please put an X in the appropriate box)				
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
The prioritisation and rating procedures used to assess grant applications are useful and valid		5 (45%)	5 (45%)	1 (10%)	
Grants are awarded by RIC based on a fair process of appraisal		6 (55%)	4 (36%)	1 (9%)	
The monitoring system for projects receiving RIC funding is appropriate	2 (16%)	1 (9%)	9 (75%)		
The RIC receives enough feedback about the projects it funds	1 (9%)	2 (16%)	8 (66%)	1 (9%)	
The RIC receives enough good quality applications for grants to enable it to allocate all of its funding		2 (18%)	8 (73%)	1 (9%)	
The RIC allocates its funding in a way that results in maximum impact for the region		4 (36%)	6 (55%)		1 (9%)

ISP Members

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
The prioritisation and rating procedures used to assess grant applications are useful and valid		1 (20%)	3 (60%)	1 (20%)	
Grants are awarded by RIC based on a fair process of appraisal		2 (40%)	3 (60%)		
The monitoring system for projects receiving RIC funding is appropriate		1 (29%)	4 (80%)		
The RIC receives enough feedback about the projects it funds			2 (66%)	1 (33%)	
The RIC receives enough good quality applications for grants to enable it to allocate all of its funding		2 (66%)	1 (33%)		
The RIC allocates its funding in a way that results in maximum impact for the region		2 (40%)	2 (40%)	1 (20%)	

RIDG Members (note: 2 of these are also ISP members)

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
The prioritisation and rating procedures used to assess grant applications are useful and valid		1 (50%)	1 (50%)		
Grants are awarded by RIC based on a fair process of appraisal		1 (50%)	1 (50%)		
The monitoring system for projects receiving RIC funding is appropriate		1 (50%)	1 (50%)		
The RIC receives enough feedback about the projects it funds			1 (50%)	1 (50%)	
The RIC receives enough good quality applications for grants to enable it to allocate all of its funding			2 (100%)		
The RIC allocates its funding in a way that results in maximum impact for the region		1 (50%)	1 (50%)		